

## Last Star 76

Star XXXI ~ The Angel's Message ~ Part I

The spaceship approached the thirty-first star system. Although Luna didn't forget about her situation, her mood improved. It was morning hours, and the dim light of a newly discovered star gently illuminated the rooms. Avi was still in her pajamas, and Charlotte was preparing breakfast.

“Good morning, Avi.” - Charlotte greeted her daughter when they passed each other in the corridor. -  
“Are you heading to the bridge?”

“Yes, I've to check what we've discovered today.” - Avi answered.

“Okay, but be quick, the breakfast might get cold.” - Charlotte replied.

Avi smiled - “Of course!” - then disappeared into the command center.

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Luna was already waiting. She glanced once at the readings, once at what was beyond the window. When Avi joined, she was speechless.

“Do you see what I see, Avi?” - Luna asked.

Avi nodded.

“What is it... and what kind of miracle made it work?” - Luna uttered. - “There are no anomalies here.”

Beyond the window, at a snail's pace, a massive jellyfish was drifting aimlessly in the cosmic expanse. Its pink, bell-shaped head had four intensely bright rings and many smaller lights on the edge. A mass of tentacles trailed behind it, stretching for miles.

“We have to show it to everyone.” - Avi added.

“I'll adjust the ship's rotation and approach, so we can see it from the recreational room.” - Luna suggested. - “I bet they'll be shocked.”

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When Luna and Avi entered the living room, they immediately noticed that their family and friends weren't eating, but instead had glued their eyes to the window.

“Amazing.” - Charlotte commented. - “How is it alive?”

Virka noticed that Luna and Avi were here. - “I never thought I would see one.”

"You know what it is?" - Luna asked.

"Belsaari." - Virka answered. - "An ancient creature from myths and legends, supposed to be as old as the universe."

"Now, I'm curious. Do you know anything more?" - Nicolas asked.

"Only what Beholder, the Immortal, told me." - Virka replied. - "I was always thinking those were just fables... he described the age when they migrated through dark wormholes, which were connected by millions of one-way gates to other dimensions. He called it a well. It was supposed to take them deeper, whatever it meant, to layers of existence that closely resemble primordial oceans... to a place where the life began, and to where it was supposed to end."

"A well." - Luna uttered. - "My data contains a memory of similar objects, but they had a reverse functionality instead... they were supposed to transfer souls to our world. Their existence was hypothesized to occur at the beginning of the universe, and analogous structures are supposed to form right before its death."

Virka understood Luna's explanation, but was depressed with what she was hearing. - "It further confirms the theory about Immortals. They witnessed the end of their world."

"It's still surprising that this Belsaari survived the collapse of reality." -Luna commented. - "I'll connect to our ship and continue scanning, maybe it will clarify things." - Just a moment passed, and Luna returned as shocked as before, with news. - "There is an artificial object on its orbit."

“A research station?” - Virka asked.

“Might be.” - Luna uttered.

Avi clapped her hands. - “Should we land!?”

“After breakfast.” - Nicolas reminded. - “Charlotte made delicious omelettes with spinach, and an apple pie.”

“Then, what are we waiting for!?” - Avi headed to the table and sat down, waiting only for her companions to join her.

Luna sighed and joined. - “Sure, sure, but don't rush your meal or you'll have digestive troubles again. No one is going to make you herbal remedies on a mission.”

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Luna's spaceship approached the edge of the jellyfish's bell, then, in an arcing motion, soared straight ahead, along the line of lights at the end of the gelatinous membrane. In the distance, it was possible to notice a force field of artificial structure, next to which a few dozen smaller spaceships were docked, most of them being one-man crafts.

“Do you see!?” - Avi asked, excited.

Luna made a full scan. - “I detect about two hundred intelligent forms of life.”

“They're probably just passing through. I assume they're not affiliated with any factions, and they had to come from different star systems.” - Virka deduced from the variety of spaceship designs. - “We might get to hear some useful gossip here.”

“I'm landing.” - Luna informed as she decelerated. When she entered the station's energy shield, she felt a gravitational pull that slowed down her ship even more and anchored it in place. - “We will have to fly inside, but it's safe to breathe and other conditions are acceptable, so you don't have to take your spacesuits.”

“Well, what are we waiting for, then!?” - Avi shouted, then dashed out of the room.

Luna sighed. - “Like in the old days.”

“She seems to have a lot of fun.” - Virka commented. - “You should try to have some, too.”

Luna cast her gaze towards the station. - “I'll make an attempt.”

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Outside, the space station looked like a steel sphere overgrown with roots of a tree that grew at its top. Avi was the first person to pass through its round gate and felt that the gravity gradually changed, pulling her to the floor. She waved her hand to her crew, and when everyone was there, she stepped inside with everyone.

A view of an elegant tavern made of polished wood opened up before Avi's team. Next to oak tables, dozens of different alien species were eating in peace, served by waitresses in monk-like robes. Avi quickly noticed that every one of these women was wearing an armband with a tree emblem, and their trays and bowls were made of clay.

“Should we order something!?!?” - Avi suggested immediately and rushed to the closest empty table.

“Avi, my darling, you literally just ate.” - Charlotte tried to rein in Avi's excitement.

“We'll just order drinks...” - Nicolas suggested. - “...and relax a bit, ask around...”

Avi sat by the window to have a clear view of the stars and of the gelatinous surface below them. With a smile, she waited until everyone else joined her.

Luna sat opposite Avi and scanned the visitors.

“So many different biological signatures.” - She commented. - “I'm wondering where they're all from.”

Virka sat next to her. - “From the outer systems. The Universal Necrosis is affecting them as much.”

A moment later, Nicolas and Charlotte were with them, and the group was approached by a hooded monk-woman. Her purple, three-fingered hands were folded as if in prayer. She lowered her head, asking. - “How can I help you, dear pilgrims?”

“We're first-time visitors.” - Virka explained. - “Are we allowed to order something to quench our thirst?”

“Of course. We have water and herbal infusions, and for those who seek comfort for their soul, stronger drinks.” - The monk-woman replied, then raised her hand and began pressing invisible buttons in the air, likely it was an augmented reality. Soon, in front of the guests, five menus appeared.

“I can't notice the prices.” - Luna mentioned, glancing at the waitress with the corner of her eye.

“Our service is free of charge, but you can donate any amount of credits as a symbolic gesture. We'll transfer all the gathered funds to charities that help the victims of Universal Necrosis.” - The monk-woman explained.

Avi looked at Luna. It was clear she wanted to support their initiative.

“Thank you for the clarification. It's a noble cause, so we'll definitely contribute.” - Luna assured.

The monk-woman thanked them with a silent bow and left.

“Well... what should we choose...” - Avi began to scroll through the offers.

Virka didn't think for long and picked a hot mead, then added it to a shared list.

Avi glanced at it and asked. - “Is it good?”

“Depends on the quality of supplies and bartender...” - Virka replied. - “...but I usually don't find any reason to complain.”

“I want it, too!” - Avi pressed the button right away.

“Starting the morning with alcohol...” - Charlotte sighed with disapproval and ordered a nuts-based coffee, while Nicolas ordered a pure, black equivalent.

Luna selected warm stewed berries, then finalized the order by adding an appropriate tip.

“Who do you think all these people are?” - Avi asked as she looked around. - “Travelers passing through? Researchers? Tourists?”

“Did you not listen?” - Virka asked. - “We were called pilgrims, so they must be here mostly due to religious reasons.”

“...but what kind of religion is it?” - Charlotte asked. - “Is it something like the cult of ever-mother?”

“We'll ask and find out.” - Virka stated when the waitress returned with their drinks. - “Excuse me.” - Virka interrupted when the monk-woman was putting cups and glasses on the table. - “As we already mentioned, we are visiting your place for the first time. Could you tell us more about it?”

The monk-woman bowed. - “Our brochures are available to everyone.” - She once more pressed a few invisible buttons in the air, summoning five small info boards. - “Forgive me for not being able to guide you personally right now, but if you don't find the information you seek, I'll be available after my shift is over. However, I would like to suggest that you ask our guests first. They rarely encounter newcomers, and I'm sure they will be interested in news from the outside.” - When she finished speaking, she bowed once and more and left to continue her servitude.

Virka opened the virtual brochure and scrolled through the data, commenting. - “Interesting. The Gate of Eternity is a haven for weary wanderers who would like to prepare for their journey to the next plane of existence. With meditation and prayers, we guide souls to abandon what is weak and mortal, cleanse destructive impulses, erase guilt, and find peace.”

“A bunch of nonsense.” - Luna uttered.

“There is more.” - Virka added. - “Long story short, they believe in the cycle of reincarnation. The tainted souls will head to nether-like realms, and if they continue to make the same choices as in their previous lives, they'll be pulled deeper and keep suffering. The cleansed souls will instead find eternal happiness in aether.”

“They're readying themselves for death.” - Nicolas added after skimming through the contents.

Luna didn't want to listen to this, but she felt she wouldn't have any choice as long as they stayed here.

Avi studied the details. - “I don't believe in their idea of reincarnation. The punishment might be sometimes necessary, but everyone has the right to redeem themselves, and it shouldn't be through more suffering, but through repentance, resocialization, and support of their loved ones.”

“Perhaps not everyone wants it.” - Nicolas stated. - “There are stubborn people, and people with cold hearts, who won't realize their sins and mistakes no matter what.”

“I don't believe in that either.” - Avi replied. - “Everyone can be reached, and there is good in everyone.”

Virka corrected. - “Your beliefs aren't contradicting their teachings, but I partially agree, it's interesting that the condemned people will need to work for their salvation increasingly harder with each wrongdoing, while those who lived a good life will be less susceptible to making wrong choices.”

“In short, metaphorically, the rich get richer, while the poor stay poor.” - Luna commented. - “According to them, neither growing up in a bad environment nor undeserved suffering justifies the evil inflicted upon others. Even so, everyone who accepts their religion and follows their teachings can still erase their sins to make their next life easier.”

“Are you suggesting their moral code isn't right?” Charlotte asked.

“No.” - Luna answered. - “I believe there are no saints. Everybody has a limit, which can easily be crossed when they're most vulnerable. Depending on economic conditions, some experience that kind of evil every day.”

Avi wanted to rebut it. - “I'm sure that there are people who do good regardless of the evil they've suffered.”

“Assuming there are...” - Luna replied. - “...it would be an anomaly, maybe a genetic one, but most people would still continue down the road society pressured them to take.”

“It's not a matter of genetics.” - Avi argued. - “It's a matter of choice and love.”

“How do you quantify your 'love?’” - Luna asked. - “Is it a special ability or power that some people are born with? Or perhaps it is acquired due to upbringing? If yes, that kind of injustice is equivalent to genetics. If no, what would make these people choose differently than their brothers and sisters?”

“I will admit, everyone is different, because that's how we were created, but everyone has the right to choose in every moment of their life. Sometimes these choices are difficult, but we always have a choice.” - Avi countered.

“That doesn't answer my question. What gives birth to this choice?” - Luna pushed.

“Soul!” - Avi replied. - “It's a conscious decision, and no external factors should influence it. Fear, weakness, hate – they might make it harder, but in the end, they're not responsible for our decision.”

“Maybe.” - Luna half-admitted. - “Unfortunately, those decisions are often ambiguous. We often don't know the consequences, and many pay the ultimate price for their mistakes.”

Avi understood what was weighing on Luna's heart. - “I don't accept it, either. There is too much injustice in the world.”

Virka sighed with a sad gaze and emptied her glass. - “Your conversations are too heavy for me. I'll sit them out by the bar.”

“Just don't overdo it.” - Nicolas commented, concerned.

Virka's tails twisted. She had a nonchalant smile. - “My metabolism is better than yours, Earthlings... but don't worry, I mainly plan to ask around, which will require sharing a bottle with locals.”

Nicolas sighed. - “In any case, take it easy.”

Virka's smile had become sharper, and it was hard to tell what she had on mind.